# Where Chinese Students Go—And Where They Don't: A 2025 Geographic Analysis

*What U.S. enrollment trends reveal about safety, strategy, and shifting perceptions in international education*

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### Introduction

Ask any international student consultant, and they'll tell you: Chinese families are still interested in U.S. higher education. But where they apply—and ultimately enroll—has changed dramatically over the last five years.

Between public health disruptions, shifting visa policies, rising tuition, and U.S.-China diplomatic tension, Chinese student behavior has grown more selective. Today, families are not just chasing rankings. They're weighing cost, safety, post-grad outcomes, and community familiarity with far more scrutiny.

In this post, we analyze verified SEVIS* and Open Doors enrollment data and regional tuition trends to answer a single question:

**Where are Chinese students enrolling in 2025—and why are they skipping others?**

**A quick note on the data: SEVIS enrollment figures include both undergraduate and graduate students on F-1 visas. However, they do not always break down populations by degree level in public reports. Where possible, we've supplemented these counts with Open Doors data and university-reported enrollment to highlight undergraduate trends.*

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## The Big Picture: Enrollment Is Still Strong—but Highly Concentrated

Chinese students remain the second-largest international group in U.S. higher education, with 277,000 enrolled in 2023–2024, according to Open Doors. But the headline number conceals key behavioral shifts.

- **Undergraduate enrollment has dipped** since its 2019 peak.

- **Graduate enrollment has increased**, especially in STEM fields—though SEVIS data doesn't always separate undergrad and grad students, Open Doors and institutional reporting suggest strong growth in master's and PhD programs.

- **Geographic concentration has intensified**—more students are enrolling at fewer schools.

Similarly, SEVIS data offers a few additional high-level insights into Chinese enrollment trends between 2022 and 2024.

- Enrollment Trends:
    - A Moderate Increase in Institutional Variety: Chinese students enrolled in 624 institutions in 2023-2024, up from 617 in the 2022-2023 cycle.
    - A Decline in Student Numbers. The total number of students enrolling in US institutions from China decreased from 19,905 in 2023-2024 to 19,180 in 2024-2025, representing a year-over-year decline of 3.64%. This suggests a potential downward trend in student enrollment.
- Cost Trends:
    - Initial Decrease, then Significant Increase. The average cost initially decreased by 0.94% from $29,362.22 in 2021-2022 to $29,086.85 in 2022-2023.
    - Sharp Rise in 2023-2024. There was a substantial increase of 24.91% in average cost from $29,086.85 in 2022-2023 to $36,331.49 in 2023-2024.
    - Stabilization in 2024-2025. The average cost remained relatively stable from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025, with a slight increase of 0.65% to $36,568.78.

**Clarification Note:** This report focuses on mainland Chinese students, as defined by SEVIS and Open Doors. Students from Hong Kong and Taiwan are tracked separately.

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# Regional Trends: The West, Northeast, and Midwest Dominate

| Region | Share of Chinese Enrollment | Avg. Net Tuition | Top Institutions |
|---|---|---|---|
| West | ~35% | ~$33,000 | UC Berkeley, UCLA, UC Irvine, USC |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Northeast | ~25–30% | ~$38,000 | NYU, Columbia, BU, Cornell |
| Midwest | ~20–25% | ~$28,000 | UIUC, Ohio State, Wisconsin |
| South | <15% | ~$26,000 | Georgia Tech, UT Austin, University of Florida |

Verified SEVIS counts of newly enrolled Chinese students (2023–2024) reveal several key concentration points for Chinese enrollment:

- **University of California system**:
    - UC Berkeley: **255**
    - UCLA: **274**
    - UC Irvine: **678**
    - UC Davis: **629**
- **Large metropolitan-area private universities**:
    - NYU: **1,481**
    - USC: **253**
    - Boston University: **348**
    - Northeastern: **394**
- **Midwest STEM giants**:
    - UIUC: **725**
    - Ohio State: **679**
    - Wisconsin: **423**
    - Minnesota: **368**

**Underrepresented Areas:**

- Southern flagships (LSU, Arkansas, Alabama, South Carolina)
- Rocky Mountain and Pacific Northwest interior (Montana, Idaho, New Mexico)

Despite lower tuition and strong programs, **many schools in the South and Mountain West are overlooked by Chinese applicants**. Why?

## Why Some Regions Are Skipped—Despite Value

Chinese families aren't just ranking-obsessed. They make multi-factor decisions based on:

- **Community familiarity** and diaspora presence
- **Visa history** and international student support
- **Job access** in major metros and STEM hubs
- **Alumni visibility** and brand trust

For example:

- **Georgia Tech** and **UT Austin** thrive thanks to their STEM prestige and city location
- **University of Florida**, though a large research university and ranked Top 30 nationally, enrolls just **57** Chinese students — likely due to lower brand visibility and regional unfamiliarity

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# The Power of Familiarity: Why Path Dependency Matters

Many of the most popular U.S. destinations for Chinese students in 2025 are not new—they're legacy favorites. This isn't inertia. It's the power of **path dependency**: when a school becomes a trusted option within a particular community, it builds a momentum that compounds over time.

Families aren't simply following the rankings—they're following **relationships**, **networks**, and **reputation capital**.

## Familiarity Is Infrastructure

Over the past decade, a core group of U.S. institutions has successfully built and maintained deep pipelines from mainland China. These schools consistently show up in student research, high school visits, WeChat groups, and parent discussions.

**Examples:**

- **UC Berkeley** and **UCLA** dominate in part due to their academic prestige—but also because of their large diaspora communities, Mandarin-speaking student organizations, and alumni visibility in Chinese media.

- **NYU**, **UIUC**, and **USC** benefit from years of active outreach, bilingual social media presence, and counselor-level trust in Chinese international schools.

Once a school crosses a threshold of visibility and comfort, it becomes a **default application**, even if competition intensifies.

The following table reflects Chinese F-1 student enrollment across the Top 30 national universities. You'll notice a striking reality: **prestige doesn't always equal popularity**. Some of the most highly ranked institutions (e.g. Princeton, MIT, Caltech) have extremely low Chinese enrollment—not because of quality, but because of size, selectivity, and outreach gaps.

## Chinese Student Enrollment by U.S. News & World Report Rank (2023–2024)

Here's how the top 30 U.S. universities ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* compare in terms of newly enrolled Chinese students. *These are based on F-1 visa information and are a composite of Chinese students enrolling in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the U.S.*

| Rank | University | Newly Enrolled Chinese Students (2022-23) | Newly Enrolled Chinese Students (2023–24) | Trend Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Princeton University | 10 | 4 | Sharp decline from 2022 |
| 2 | Massachusetts Institute of Technology | 7 | 5 | Moderate decline from 2022 |
| 3 | Harvard University | 12 | 17 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 4 | Stanford University | 28 | 15 | Sharp decrease from 2022 |
| 5 | Yale University | 13 | 13 | Same as 2022. Could indicate geographical quota if long-term pattern. |
| 6 | California Institute of Technology | 5 | 3 | Moderate decrease from 2022 |
| 6 | Duke University | 21 | 39 | Sharp increase from 2022 |
| 6 | Johns Hopkins University | 76 | 76 | Same as 2022. Could indicate geographical quota if long-term pattern. |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 6 | Northwestern University | 37 | 30 | Moderate decline from 2022 |
| 10 | University of Pennsylvania | 30 | 23 | Moderate decline from 2022 |
| 11 | Cornell University | 104 | 128 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 11 | University of Chicago | 205 | 84 | Sharp decline from 2022 |
| 13 | Brown University | 26 | 31 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 13 | Columbia University | 56 | 79 | Sharp increase from 2022 |
| 15 | Dartmouth College | 15 | 9 | Moderate decline from 2022 |
| 15 | University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) | 188 | 193 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 17 | University of California–Berkeley | 232 | 255 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 18 | Rice University | 55 | 54 | Similar to 2022. Could indicate geographical quota if long-term pattern. |
| 18 | University of Notre Dame | 79 | 39 | Sharp decrease from 2022 |
| 18 | Vanderbilt University | 79 | 97 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 21 | Washington University in St. Louis | 130 | 116 | Moderate decrease from 2022 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 21 | Carnegie Mellon University | 161 | 109 | Sharp decrease from 2022 |
| 23 | University of Michigan–Ann Arbor | 283 | 336 | Sharp increase from 2022 |
| 24 | Georgetown University | 13 | 13 | Same as 2022. Could indicate geographical quota if long-term pattern. |
| 24 | Emory University | 119 | 232 | Sharp increase from 2022 |
| 24 | University of Virginia | 76 | 49 | Sharp decrease from 2022 |
| 27 | UNC–Chapel Hill | 112 | 166 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 27 | University of Southern California (USC) | 202 | 253 | Moderate increase from 2022 |
| 29 | University of Florida | 50 | 57 | Moderate increase from 2022 |

## Top 20 U.S. Universities by Chinese Enrollment (2023–2024)

| Rank | University | Newly Enrolled Chinese Student Count | Type | Approximate Student Population (Graduate + Undergraduate) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | New York University | 1,481 | Private | 62,000 |
| 2 | UIUC | 725 | Public | 60,000 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 3 | Ohio State University | 679 | Public | 67,000 |
| 4 | UC Irvine | 678 | Public | 37,000 |
| 5 | UC Davis | 629 | Public | 39,000 |
| 6 | UC Santa Barbara | 439 | Public | 26,000 |
| 7 | University of Wisconsin–Madison | 423 | Public | 52,000 |
| 8 | University of Washington –Seattle | 420 | Public | 52,000 |
| 9 | Northeastern University | 394 | Private | 31,000 |
| 10 | University of Minnesota–Twin Cities | 368 | Public | 55,000 |
| 11 | Boston University | 348 | Private | 37,000 |
| 12 | University of Michigan - Ann Arbor | 336 | Public | 52,000 |
| 13 | School of Visual Arts | 307 | Private | 3,700 |
| 14 | University of Rochester | 272 | Private | 12,000 |
| 15 | Rutgers University-New Brunswick | 261 | Public | 50,000 |
| 16 | University of Connecticut | 260 | Public | 33,000 |
| 17 | University of California-Berkeley | 255 | Public | 46,000 |

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|---|---|---|---|---|
| 18 | University of Southern California | 253 | Private | 47,000 |
| 19 | University of Pittsburgh-Pittsburgh Campus | 251 | Public | 34,000 |
| 20 | University of California-San Diego | 241 | Public | 42,000 |

## Overrepresentation: When Familiarity Becomes Saturation

While trust builds enrollment, it can also increase competition. The most well-known U.S. universities among Chinese families are starting to show signs of saturation—not just at the undergraduate level, but across total enrollment including graduate programs.

### U.S. Schools Where Chinese Students Make Up a High % of the Total Undergraduate and Graduate Student Body (2023–2024)

| Rank | University | New Chinese Student Count (2023-2024) | Estimated Total Enrollment | % of New Chinese Students (2023-2024) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | New York University | 1,481 | 60,000 | 2.47% |
| 2 | University of California–Irvine | 678 | 37,000 | 1.83% |
| 3 | UC Santa Barbara | 439 | 26,000 | 1.69% |
| 4 | UC Davis | 629 | 39,000 | 1.61% |
| 5 | UIUC | 725 | 52,000 | 1.39% |

### Why This Matters

Even when spread across undergraduate and graduate programs, the concentration of Chinese students at certain institutions is remarkably high. This reflects strong pipelines, deep institutional trust, and a long track record of success—but it also reflects competition.

> When Chinese students make up **more than 1.5% of an institution's total student body**, you're looking at a school with well-established demand from China—and potentially a more saturated applicant pool.

### Example:

**New York University** enrolled **1,481** new Chinese students in 2023–2024, representing **nearly 2.5%** of its total student body in one year. That's a massive footprint—and it means Chinese applicants will face not just academic standards, but increasing **institutional pressure to diversify international enrollment**.

On the other hand, many similarly ranked universities—like Emory, Notre Dame, or Rice—enroll far fewer Chinese students. For savvy applicants, these under-enrolled schools may offer:

- A stronger admissions edge
- Greater visibility as a top applicant
- Access to similar academic outcomes with less competition

> Your odds of admission aren't just about prestige—they're about positioning. The most crowded pipelines aren't always the smartest.

## Strategic Takeaway

Chinese families aren't wrong to apply to places like NYU, UC Irvine, or UIUC. These schools offer proven value, trusted support systems, and well-established Chinese student communities. They're popular for a reason.

But popularity comes with a price.

If your goal is to **maximize admissions odds while maintaining quality**, you need to consider **relative saturation** alongside prestige. A school enrolling hundreds of Chinese students each year may feel safe—but also more competitive, more crowded, and more constrained by institutional balance goals.

In contrast, many equally strong universities enroll far fewer Chinese students—not because they lack quality, but because they're lesser known or overlooked in the China-U.S. pipeline.

**Familiarity is not a guarantee. It's a signal.** And in 2025, sometimes the smartest move is to zig where others zag.

# What Open Doors Shows About Chinese Enrollment —And Why It Matters

SEVIS gives us a snapshot: how many Chinese students arrived in your target year (2023–24). But it can't show who stayed or how big the Chinese student footprint has become at campuses. That's what Open Doors reveals—**the full count of Chinese students on U.S. campuses that year**, from undergrad and grad to OPT and short-term programs.

Comparing the two gives us context:

- **SEVIS** signals momentum.
- **Open Doors** signals presence.

When you overlay both, you see who's entrenched—and who may still offer space to stand out.

## Institutions with Publicly Reported Chinese Enrollment (Open Doors Context)

To complement SEVIS intake data, here are universities where credible external reporting (press or institutional) highlights Chinese student presence—roughly in the context of Open Doors totals (even though these exact numbers aren't published in Open Doors public tables).

| Institution | SEVIS Intake (2023–24) | Reported Total Chinese Enrollment |
|---|---|---|
| **New York University** | 1,481 | ~14,072 (≈51.6% of intl. students) |
| **Northwestern University** | 30 | Chinese students ≈50% of intl. body |
| **UC San Diego** | 241 | 3,826 Chinese students (largest group) |
| **UC Davis** | 629 | ~3,600 Chinese students (≈9% of campus) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Emory University** | 232 | China is largest origin group among ~3,300 intl. students |
| **University of Michigan - Ann Arbor** | 336 | >40% of all international students from China |
| **USC** | 253 | ~6,000 Chinese students (largest group at USC) |

## Why This Matters

The comparison shows a crucial split:

- **High SEVIS intake + high Chinese population (Open Doors context) ➜** entrenched, highly competitive pipelines (e.g. NYU, USC).

- **Moderate SEVIS intake + growing presence ➜** emerging pipelines with upward momentum (e.g. UC Davis, Emory, UMich).

- **Low on both metrics ➜** smaller-but-stable niche or elite schools with limited Chinese visibility.

This layered view helps families differentiate **where competition is entrenched** vs. **where opportunity is rising**.

If a school shows both high SEVIS intake and Open Doors presence, it's deeply embedded in China-to-U.S. pipelines—trust, visibility, competition baked in. If intake is isolated, but footprint is high, it suggests yield or plateau. If both are low, the school may offer space to stand out.

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## Missed Opportunities: High-Quality, Low-Enrollment Schools

When most families think of applying to U.S. universities, the focus tends to center around a familiar core: NYU, UIUC, UC Irvine, and UC Davis. These are well-established destinations for Chinese students—and they're increasingly saturated.

But our data shows there are **elite institutions flying under the radar**, especially when it comes to **newly enrolled Chinese students**. And that has **strategic implications**.

## Underrepresented U.S. News Top 50 Schools by Chinese Student Enrollment (2023–2024)

| U.S. News Rank | University | Newly Enrolled Chinese Student Count in 2023-2024 |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Princeton University | **4** |
| 2 | Massachusetts Institute of Technology | **5** |
| 3 | Harvard University | **17** |
| 4 | Stanford University | **15** |
| 5 | Yale University | **13** |
| 6 | California Institute of Technology | **3** |
| 6 | Duke University | **39** |
| 10 | University of Pennsylvania | **23** |
| 15 | Dartmouth College | **9** |
| 24 | Georgetown University | **13** |
| 24 | University of Virginia | **49** |
| 29-30 | University of Florida | **57** |
| 30 | University of Texas at Austin | **58** |
| 47 | University of Georgia | **6** |

## Why This Matters

The number of international students from a single country at a university—especially one as prominent as China—can subtly shape **admissions decisions**, **visa office capacity**, and **campus culture**.

- Schools that already enroll large numbers of Chinese students may have **less room to expand further**, either by policy (like UC system-wide nonresident caps) or institutional goals for geographic diversity.

- Meanwhile, **comparable institutions with fewer Chinese students** may offer a less crowded—and therefore more strategic—pathway for equally strong applicants.

This isn't a guarantee of easier admission. But it **is** a signal worth watching.

### For example:

- **UC Irvine** enrolled **678** newly arriving Chinese students in 2023–2024. That's nearly **1.8% of its total student body**—a clear indicator of heavy demand and an already-established applicant pipeline. Continued growth may be constrained by UC enrollment limits or diversification efforts.

- **University of Michigan** enrolled **336** newly arriving Chinese students—despite having a much larger overall population and a strong global brand in STEM fields. That **mismatch suggests room for growth** and potential headroom for well-qualified Chinese applicants.

- Similarly, **University of Texas at Austin**, **Rice University**, **Duke University**, and **University of Florida** maintain strong academic reputations, metro access, and research credentials, yet remain **significantly under-enrolled** by Chinese students. This likely reflects **visibility gaps—not barriers to entry**.

## What This Means for Strategy

If two schools are comparably ranked and offer similar academic outcomes, but one enrolls **700+ Chinese students annually** and the other enrolls **fewer than 100**, the latter may present a **less saturated, more strategic opportunity**.

> In other words, **don't just chase reputation—chase positioning.**
> Strategic families are widening the lens to include not just "where others go," but **where strong applicants are more likely to stand out**.

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# What's New in 2024–2025?

While many core trends have held steady, the past year has brought subtle—but important—shifts in Chinese enrollment behavior. Here's what stands out in this cycle:

## 1. A Small but Measurable Decline in Total Enrollment

According to SEVIS, the total number of mainland Chinese students holding active F-1 or M-1 visas in the U.S. declined slightly to **329,500 records in 2024**, representing a **0.25% drop** from the previous year. Open Doors data reflects a similar trend, reporting a **4% year-over-year decrease**, down to approximately **277,400 mainland Chinese students**.

While these drops aren't dramatic, they continue a post-pandemic stabilization pattern: rather than rebounding sharply, Chinese enrollment is plateauing at a slightly lower—but more intentional—level.

This isn't an exodus. It's a recalibration.

## 2. Graduate Programs (Especially STEM) Are Driving Growth

The decline in total enrollment masks a deeper trend: **graduate programs are growing**, while **undergraduate interest is tapering off**.

Master's and Ph.D. applicants from China—particularly in **computer science, engineering, business analytics, and AI-adjacent fields**—remain strong, if not growing. These students are highly focused on **research output, post-grad employment prospects, and H-1B sponsorship rates**.

Undergraduate enrollment, on the other hand, is becoming more concentrated. Rather than casting a wide net, families are applying to **fewer, more strategically selected schools**.

## 3. Familiarity Trumps Exploration

The top destinations haven't changed—and that's exactly the point.

Each year, thousands of Chinese students apply to the U.S.—yet their final landing spots tend to cluster. According to SEVIS data, the **top 10 universities by newly enrolled Chinese student count in 2023–2024** are:

- **New York University**
- **UIUC**
- **Ohio State University**
- **UC Irvine**
- **UC Davis**
- **UC Santa Barbara**
- **University of Wisconsin–Madison**
- **University of Washington –Seattle**
- **Northeastern University**
- **University of Minnesota–Twin Cities**

These institutions continue to dominate not just because of rankings, but because they offer a **trusted mix of academic credibility, visa support, urban access, and community familiarity**. Once a school gains traction in WeChat groups, high school counselor networks, and alumni circles, it often stays in the top tier for years to come.

**The takeaway?** For all the options available in the U.S. system, **Chinese student behavior remains highly concentrated**—and that concentration creates both comfort and competition.

Once a school gains traction in the Chinese community, it tends to keep it.

## 4. Visa Scrutiny and STEM-Specific Caution Are On the Rise

While most students continue to receive visas without issue, **scrutiny has increased**—especially in tech-related disciplines.

Fields like data science, semiconductors, and AI are being more heavily scrutinized under current U.S. national security frameworks. That doesn't mean students are being rejected en masse, but it does introduce **uncertainty**, particularly for families targeting elite STEM programs.

> The result? A tilt toward schools with strong visa support offices and a track record of H-1B transitions.

## 5. A Rising Demand for Strategic, Data-Informed Decision-Making

One of the most important shifts this year is **how families are making decisions**.

They're not just asking: *"Is this a top-ranked school?"*
They're asking: *"Will my child be admitted?" "Will they be supported?" "Will they thrive?"*

This has led to a more nuanced evaluation of factors like:

- Institutional capacity for Chinese students
- Relative admissions saturation (e.g., UC vs. Michigan vs. WashU)
- Availability of Chinese-speaking faculty or advisors
- Career outcomes for international grads

In short, families want **personalized strategy**, not just prestige.

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## Final Takeaways: It's Not Just About Rankings

Chinese students in 2025 are not abandoning the U.S.—they're becoming more **strategic, community-aware, and ROI-conscious** in their decision-making.

If you're a family:

> Look beyond the top 10. The best school for your child may be one that offers better access, affordability, and fit.

If you're a university:

> Ask yourself what support systems, outreach strategies, and reputation cues you're offering to Chinese families—both online and on the ground.

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## Coming Next in This Series…

This is the first post in our **Global Matriculation Project**—a region-by-region look at where international students are enrolling and what their choices reveal.

Coming soon:

- **Two Additional China-Specific Analyses** – A deeper dive into the most misunderstood and most consequential market in international admissions today.
- **India Edition** – How tech dreams shape global application patterns and how India took the enrollment crown from China—and what that means for future competitiveness.
- **Middle East Edition** – Funding models and shifting institutional loyalty reveal why Gulf-based students are redefining prestige, access, and ambition.
- **East, Southeast Asia & Australia Edition** – From Vietnam to Korea, a rising wave of regional momentum is quietly altering the balance of power in Asia-Pacific enrollment.
- **Africa Edition** – Emerging talent, scholarship pipelines, and the untapped potential of a continent on the brink of international education expansion.
- **Europe & UK Edition** – How Brexit, U.S. tuition costs, and dual-degree options are shaping a new era of transatlantic student mobility.
- **North & South American Edition** – Regional familiarity, affordability, and intra-continental exchange are driving unexpected enrollment trends across the Americas.
- **U.S. Regional Analysis Edition** – A closer look at which American regions are winning—and losing—international students, and why location may be destiny.
- **Final Synthesis and Global Takeaways** – What institutions and families must understand about the future of global admissions: patterns, pivots, and how to stay ahead.